

THE SOPHISTS

The story of Corax and Tisias, whether true or not, make several points about rhetoric that are important to understanding the early history of the art.

First, rhetoric as a systematic art was developed by a group of orators, educators, entertainers, and advocates called SOPHISTS (from the Greek word *sophos*, meaning wise or skilled). These people taught rhetoric or the art of *logos*, and the title *sophistes* (plural, *sophistae*) carried with it something of the modern meaning of professor--a learned, skilled person, authority, expert, teacher.

Sophists also hired themselves out as professional pladers and speech writers. As rhetoric quickly was becoming important to achieving success, particularly in governmental careers, the services of Sophists as teachers were sought out by aggressive, success-oriented young men.

Second, the Sophist often employed a method of teaching that involved learning to argue either side of a case, and some of them even boasted of "making the worse case appear the better," a statement often attributed to a famous sophist named Protagoras.

Third, the specious nature of the arguments advanced by Corax and Tisias illustrates the suspicion with which the art of rhetoric and Sophist as teachers of the art were greeted by traditional Greek society. The Sophists' ability to persuade with clever arguments and stylistic techniques, and their willingness to teach others to do the same, led many Greeks to see the Sophists as a dangerous element in their society.

GORGIAS, PROTAGORAS, THE SOPHISTS CONTINUED

428-347 BC

Plato, the teacher of Aristotle, lived in Athens in the generation following the arrival of the first Sophists, encouraged this suspicion with his dialogues, Gorgias, Sophist, and Protagoras.

Gorgias was a great practitioner of rhetoric and a famous stylist who died in 380 B.C. He was known as a skeptical philosopher and stylist and is famous, among other things, for his three-part formulation of radical Skepticism:

1. Nothing exists
2. If anything did exist, we could not know it.
3. If we could know that something existed, we would not be able to communicate it to anyone else.

Protagoras is alleged to have been "the first person who charged for lectures", and some considered him to be the first of the Greek Sophists.

His most famous maxim was:

"Man is the measure of all things; of things that are not, that they are not;
of things that are, that they are."

What he meant by this claim, in true Sophistic fashion, has been the subject of much debate.

At least he seems to have had in mind that people make determinations about what is or is not true, and that no ultimate or absolute appeal can be made to settle such questions once and for all.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) who was born around the time the Sophist Gorgias died (380 B.C.), commented on the Sophists' empty arguments. More than four centuries after Aristotle, Sophists from Greece still were plying their trade in Rome, and similar suspicions attended them.

However, some recent scholarship presents the Sophists as important intellectual figures who have received a somewhat undeservedly negative press. (Susan Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*)

Regardless of the examples set by Corax and Tisias, and the questions raised by the art of rhetoric as practiced by the Sophists, rhetoric caught on and was an enormous success in the Greek-speaking world of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

(James Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*)